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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of students in early childhood education are questioning critically the relationship of their professional training and academic background to the realities of their role as educators. This reflection has identified skills required for their work as educators for which they have not been adequately trained. To identify skills considered crucial for a pre-service teacher in early childhood education, 40 early childhood educators in preschool education settings were interviewed and administered a questionnaire. Results showed that the skills required of the early childhood educator are numerous. The teacher's role goes well beyond the provision of custodial care, and requires planning in many aspects of children's development. Observation skills, planning integration skills, and diagnosis of children's needs were rated as extremely important by the majority of the participating teachers. All participants indicated that parent conferences were important, but that they were not a priority in their training. In general, a variety of skill areas were identified as being important, indicating the complexity of the early educator's role. (RH)

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Critical Skills for the Early Childhood Educator

Paper Presentation

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1. Title of Presentation: Critical Skills for the Early Childhood Educator.

2. Brief Description: An increasing number of students in early childhood education are questioning and reflecting upon their professional training and academic background and the actual reality of their professional role as educators. Early childhood personnel still struggle and search after many deliberate and comprehensive efforts to conceptualize a framework of skills areas that reflect the complexity of their role (Getz, 1980; Caldwell, 1984). What are the skill areas that early educators of young children need to begin developing in their field experience? What areas of professional growth are critical in working with young children, parents, auxiliary personnel, speech and physical therapists? Forty early childhood educators in preschool education settings were interviewed and administered a questionnaire on what skills were critical for a pre-service teacher in early childhood education. A variety of skill areas were identified as extremely important, and the range of skills involved typified the complexity of the role of early educator.

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4. Applicable Strand: Early Childhood Education Research

Introduction

For many years, there has been a deep concern regarding the professional status of early educators. A major part of this concern grows from the increasing evidence (Silin, 1985; Moyer, 1986) of the importance of quality care. It seems clear that the education of children involves many complex decisions. Young children need support, encouragement and invidualized lessons to match their needs and abilities. Early childhood education should be seen as an integrated education for the child, where specific opportunities are provided that will contribute to their development.

Similarly, awareness has increased for the "professionalism" of the early educator. Katz (1984) emphasizes the need for quality training and education of early childhood teachers. Katz (1984) argues that early childhood teachers can make a significant contribution to children's development and learning. The child care practitioner, or the day care worker all share in the need for professional development and recognition. Almy (1975) states the need for early childhood educators to be learners. She states that the teacher should continue developing, and growing and that learning is a continuous process.

According to several researchers, one of the greatest threats to quality early childhood education is incompetent teachers (Peters, 1985; Almy, 1975). As an important part of this professional awareness grows the need for a conceptual framework of what skill areas are required of the individual who works with young children (Getz, 1980). What does the early educator need to know in order to be an effective teacher of young children? How is this content different from a student teacher training for the elementary level in education? Are academic credentials an indication of the individual's

knowledge and effectiveness? Should the teacher in training have extensive experience in working with young children? Or will academic training and experience be sufficient in preparing the new teacher? An extremely important issue is the need to recognize which particular skills are identified as critical ones for a pre-service teacher and are they being taught in their academic preparation?

The preservice teacher is the individual engaged in a brief 5-10 week field experience. Typically, the emphasis lies in planning skills, reflective teaching ability and organization. For many, the preservice is the first or second experience working with young children. Typically, in many universities the pre-service training period takes place in the last half of the junior year, or in the first part of the senior year. It differs from the "student teaching experience" in that it is shorter and more structured. For many education students, the prepracticum field experience is an opportunity to develop and refine their teaching skills. It is also an opportunity to understand what it is that teachers do, and if they sincerely want to enter the field of education as teachers.

Needs for the Study

First, there is a need to conceptually clarify what it is that early childhood professionals do in the classroom. Caregivers serve primarily a caregiving/nurturing function. Whereas, teachers serve primarily an educational function in the early childhood setting. Second, it is critical to identify which skills areas are necessary for the preservice teachers to be developing in efforts to become an effective early childhood teacher. Dreeben

(1970) points out that frequently teachers are uncertain about their central acts and advocates a more highly defined technology of teaching. For example, many teachers in the early childhood setting see their role as having an affective focus in child development, and educational goals are sometimes perceived as secondary concerns. Getz (1980) in a later study developed and proposed a skills inventory involving five major areas of the early educator. These included: (1) organizational tasks, (2) formative tasks, (3) education tasks, (4) personnel relations, and (5) professional development. Another problem is that college curriculums in education offer many courses for early childhood educators but they are ones designed on an elementary level and taught by specific content area professionals.

In the early childhood education setting, the variety of required tasks are great. The "new teacher" must possess a wide range of skills. If the teacher does set the stage, then a wide range of skills need to be evident. For example, Evans (1975) indicates that teaching effectiveness in early childhood must include the skills of flexibility, resourcefulness, effective communication skills, and qualities such as secure self image, and patience. Organizational tasks are many, because multiage grouping in early childhood education is frequent, and the planning required for individualized instruction is extensive.

Purpose for the Investigation

As mentors, educators, or supervisors of those individuals training to become educators of young children, the need to re-examine and identify skill areas is critical. An important part of the professional status of early

childhood teachers lies in the academic preparation and training. The skills and academic needs of the teacher in early education are unique. For the early educator works with the whole child and grapples with socio-emotional, physical and intellectual needs. Academic preparation must include coursework focusing on developmental issues. Field work, and student teaching must provide opportunities for the teacher in training to interact with young children in a variety of ways. The purpose of the present investigation was to examine the needs and direction of skills in teachers in contrast to their academic coursework and preparation.

Methods

Sample

The sample included forty early childhood educators from University Park, PA. Their educational background included a minimum of a bachelors in education, child development or a related field. The teachers were cooperating teachers in that they had supervised students in field site teaching for at least a year. Of the sample, thirty-two teachers were educators in community day care centers, two were in family day care settings, and six were from a Montessori day care program. Of the forty teachers, thirty had four year college degrees, and ten had a masters level of education. From this total of forty, 28 were graduates of an early childhood curriculum. Six teachers were graduates of various backgrounds, and trained in an International Montessori Institute. The remaining six teachers had 4 year degrees in elementary education. Of the 10 teachers who held the masters degree, 7 were in elementary education, and 3 in early childhood education

curriculum. All cooperating teachers worked with a pre-service student teacher in Early Childhood Education from Pennsylvania State University, University Park PA.

Each teacher was administered a questionnaire—the Skills Assessment of the Preservice Teacher (SAPT). The questionnaire assessed which skills areas they considered crucial for the pre-service teacher. The exploratory instrument consisted of 24 items addressing skill areas of the preservice teacher. The format included a Likert Scale of 1 to 5 with 5 representing most important and 1 being least important. Each item allowed for comments. The Skills Assessment of the Preservice Teacher (SAPT) questionnaire served as an important indicators of what experience early educators deemed important in the applied setting.

Results showed that for the Requirement of Keeping of Journal, cooperating teachers had mixed ratings. Twenty-five believed that keeping a journal was extremely or very important. The remaining 15 teachers felt unsure or that it was of moderate importance. Narrative comments did reflect that the journal was a good communicative link, and an effective exercise in reflecting upon one's teaching behavior.

The skill area of implementing lessons in several content areas was rated as extremely or very important by 26 teachers. Comments reflected the concern that student teachers have problems with integrating content, and reteaching lessons. Six teachers argued for more content integration in the student teachers college curriculum.

The making of instructional materials was rated as having high priority by 28 teachers. thirty-three teachers commented that early childhood educators need to engage in this more frequently.

Thirty-six cooperating teachers rated using public resources such as media centers and libraries as extremely or very important. Twelve teachers made negative comments in that their student teachers were really weak in this area of teaching.

Diagnosing a child's needs was rated as extremely important by the majority of the 40 teachers. Thirty-six rated the skill area as extremely important, 3 rated it as very important, and 1 as unsure.

The student telacher observing the classroom placement prior to student teaching was rated extremely important or very important by 35 teachers. Seventeen comments described a focused observation as the best strategy for the student teacher. Six comments stated that more student teachers need observation time.

Consistent observation was rated as extremely or very important by 35 teachers. Twenty comments included concern regarding the student's ability to observe. They argued for specific training and content background in observation skills.

Documenting the observation was rated high by all 40 teachers and the comments were mixed. Sixteen argued for specific documentation in narrative, while twenty others favored a rating check list for observation use.

Planning for parent involvement was distributed across the categories. Eighteen were either unsure, or did not rate it high. Twenty teachers rated it as extremely or very important. Comments were varied in that many (32) described the planning as important for later teaching it was not immediately critical for the pre-service student teacher.

Implementing a parent involvement project was rated by only half as being important. Many comments (13) suggested that student teachers need to have opportunities for implementing parent involvement, but not during student teaching.

Behavior management was rated high by all 40 teachers. The comments described many issues for the student to grapple with prior to field teaching. Twelve teacher comments stated that coursework and review of the strategies was necessary. Twenty-two teachers wrote that student teachers need "field experiences" that focus on classroom management tasks.

Communication between the classroom teracher and the student teacher was rated high by 38 teachers. A working relationship, and better organization were issues commented on.

The student teacher working with staff in parent meetings was rated low by 33 teachers. the comments ranged from issues of maturity, confidentiality to other areas were of more importance.

The student teacher attending staff meetings was rated by 29 teachers as important. The comments stressed issues of professionalism, sharing, and better communication.

The tape recording of the lesson was rated by all 40 teachers as important. The comments pointed to issues of growth, reflectivity in the students to 'more of this is needed.'

Integrating subject areas was rated as important by 30 teachers. Teachers (22) wrote that this seemed to be a critical weak area of students in early childhood education. Twelve teachers criticized college curriculums, and 3 cited the overlap of elementary methods into early childhood coursework.

Utilizing music was rated by 38 teachers as important, and comments were few. Three teachers wrote that they were concerned if their specific teacher had any music methods coursework.

Utilizing children's literature was rated as important by all 40 teachers. Twenty-one comments criticized the lack of background their students had in children's literature. Sixteen teachers argued for specific coursework, and field work for the student teacher.

Being organized was considered by 39 teachers as important. However, 19 comments included concerns regarding planning organization. Sixteen teachers felt their students were farily organized, but needed more opportunities.

Communicating with parents was rated by 26 teachers as important, and of 1 on importances by 15 teachers. Twelve teachers felt the student teacher had many responsibilities, and that parent communication was a low priority. However, 21 teachers strongly stated that communication with parents as an early educator was critical.

The skill area ranked as the important was the ability to recognize children's needs through observation (32). Five teachers rated time management as the most important, 2 for organization, and 1 rating for classroom management.

Summary

If early educators are to be recognized as professional decision makers and authorities about our children, we need to look more closely at how they are being academically trained. As professionals, and researchers we need to recognize the tremendous diversity of early childhood programs and the role it

shapes for the early educator. Results showed in the present study that the skill demands are numerous for the early childhood professional. The teacher's role goes beyond the mechanistic custodial role. The position requires planning in many aspects of the child's development.

Observation skills, planning integration skills, and diagnosis of children's needs were rated as extremely important by the majority of the cooperating teachers. This is important to recognize in that are these identified skill areas being taught and reviewed in the college classroom? Do students in early childhood education engage in diagnostic tasks? Is one course in curriculum planning sufficient? In the curriculum of the student teachers, limited coursework and training in diagnostic planning was evident in their program. Similarly, another gap in what is perceived as critical lies in effective communication skills. All cooperating teachers stated that parent conferences were important but not significant in the student teaching program. However, such a crucial skill needs development prior to becoming a professional educator. Comments of 29 teachers stated that during pre-service student teaching, parent conferences were not top priority but later in their development did it require attention. If there is to be quality training, such skill areas need to be addressed early on in the student teaching program.

Few universities offer a course in parent involvement and if so—implementation of activities is lacking in the field. Conferencing with other professionals in the field was also ranked as mildly important. This is interesting in that all teachers rated communication as extremely important.

There is a great deal of agreement regarding which items were ranked as extremely important for the preservice teacher. Of particular value is that

many skill areas are reported as extremely important. Many skills deemed as important are not rated as critical ones for pre-service development. When will the pre-service teacher develop these multitude of skills? When will the pre-service teacher exercise what they know in parent involvement, if it is not part of their training. The question is if indeed specific skill areas are targeted as contemporary issues for the early educator are we preparing our teachers in an adequate manner? The professional teacher must use judgement based on the most reliable knowledge and insight available (Katz, 1984).

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